



REMEMBERING SLAVERY & HUMAN DIGNITY

Writing for a public that for the greatest part was born and raised in a Judeo-Christian setting we refer to one of the most important sources of our culture. According to Torah, better known to us as the Old Testament, human beings were created in the image and likeness of God, the Imago Dei. This forms the philosophical foundation of the idea of human dignity. Humans therefore are living beings; they do not belong to the world of things. They are beings who love to be free, long to relate to other humans and live purposeful lives

As we remember slavery in the Americas this idea comes to mind. Let us state the case in a very simple manner. The peoples of Europe overcame fear and ventured out to the shores of the African continent. Some brave guys decided to cross the Atlantic Ocean and discovered there were lands on the other side. These lands were filled with commodities that could be used in European trade. One should never forget they were in search of economic opportunity. The tale goes that they were greeted by the friendly inhabitants who believed they were spirits from another realm. Those who set foot on the shores brought also the Christian religion to the local population. Blinded by financial gain the Natives were forcefully put to work by the Europeans. They were looked at as

instruments and not as human beings. When these instruments of production became damaged goods, with the advice and blessing of Church officials, laborers were imported from the African mainland to the Americas. Estimates show that about 10 million individuals crossed the ocean. Let us just narrow our focus. This is not to become melodramatic but to further build the case. Millions of individuals were taken from their families, clan, village and transported to an unknown place. Every one of them was unique. Every one loved freedom, cherished their relationships and thought about the meaning of life. Did they understand that this was a one way trip? Some lost their lives during passage while as others reached the other side and became the forefathers and foremothers of many. Images of

the ships with slaves are powerful reminders of what the human race is capable of doing.

At a given moment the moral code felt the spirit of the age. Many on both sides of the Atlantic began to see slavery and the slave trade as institutions that were not compatible with the concept of human dignity. Slaves long deprived of their dignity were welcomed, not always with open arms, into the family of human kind. On Emancipation millions of objects became humans. Yet the fight to preserve human dignity did not end. In many countries racism and poverty deprived many of living a dignified life.

Moved and appalled by the atrocities of the Second World War the generation that survived the war went on to create a better world. They had seen the total disrespect for differences in religion, race and orientation. Human life was willfully brought to an end in gas chambers. On December 10, 1948 the world spoke out. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was called into existence. The Universal Declaration would be a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations. A value system was presented to the whole world. Here was a system that would remove all other values; that would replace all other values. Yes, a new creed to be adhered by all members of humanity. Here was a creed that proclaimed human life to be sacred and worthy of protection. Here was a document that made human dignity as the basis of a good society. After the universal declaration the world community saw the negotiation and ratification of many human rights instruments. Under the auspices of the United Nations Organization civil and political rights were laid down in a treaty in 1966: freedom of expression and religion and the right to vote. In the same year social, cultural and economic rights were put into a treaty. On the American and European continents courts were set up to protect human rights. The courts at San Jose,

Costa Rica and Strasbourg, France have become beacons of hope. Hope that the value system will become part and parcel of the fabric of human society.

The past decades we have seen intolerance growing instead of diminishing in our global village. The Republic of Yugoslavia did not break up without bloodshed. The shedding of the blood of Muslims by the Serbs made daily world news. The massacre of Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the Great Lake region on the African continent is a reminder that bridging the ethnic gap is still necessary. September 11, 2001 the world saw what intolerance can do. Moved by hatred for those considered infidels young men decided to give their lives as instruments in the extermination of people who do not follow the teachings of the holy Quoran and respect the prophet Mohammed.

Where do we then go from here? Human dignity remains central to human society. Remembering slavery and the Universal Declaration we hope not to make the same mistakes. We hope not to trash human dignity because of economic gain or political or religious ideology. And it may help if we in humility may recall that the foundation of dignity is transcendental not material. Human dignity is rooted in the Imago Dei. ■

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BRANDING SLAVES.